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AUTHOR Lewis, Sharon; Baker, Nicole D.; Jepson, Jack; Casserly, Mike; Powell, Linda C.; Barrengos, John R.; Johnson, Judith; Eisner, Caroline, Ed.

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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from a forum held in 2000 with urban educators representing 15 districts nationwide. The forum, which was facilitated by educational researchers from Columbia University's Teachers College, shared best practices for reforming high poverty urban high schools and reviewed the Department of Education's "Transforming Title I High Schools: Enacting Comprehensive, Standards-Based Reform in Challenging Settings." Ten important results from the discussion included: educational reform does not occur in a vacuum; standards-based reform is complicated in urban high schools by having to meet the many nonacademic needs of diverse students; continuous leadership development is critical to improving urban high schools; practitioners bring diverse experiences to the work of urban high school reform; practitioners must maintain a high level of commitment; a clear vision with high standards is critical; and public attitudes about investing in low-income urban students must be addressed. A list of 21 critical components for successful urban high schools is included (e.g., create an environment for school staff to learn from one another, recognize and address diverse students' needs, recognize and reward exemplary teachers, encourage and foster teacher renewal, build collaborative relationships with teacher unions, and provide adequate funding). (SM)

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# Great Expectations: Reforming Urban High Schools

*An Education Forum with Urban Educators and Leaders*

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

Council of the Great City Schools

October 2000

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*Great Expectations:*
*Reforming Urban High Schools*

Report Prepared by:

Sharon Lewis, Council of the Great City Schools
Nicole D. Baker, Council of the Great City Schools
Jack Jepson, Council of the Great City Schools
Mike Casserly, Council of the Great City Schools
Linda C. Powell, Teachers College, Columbia University
John R. Barrengos, Teachers College, Columbia University
Judith Johnson, U.S. Department of Education
Caroline Eisner, Editor

Forum Facilitated by:

Linda Powell, Ph.D.
John Barrengos, M.Ed.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
and the
Council of the Great City Schools

October 2000

## Introduction

America's high poverty urban high schools face daunting challenges such as overcrowded classes, large numbers of uncertified teachers, low expectations from the public, inadequate funding, and decrepit facilities. In spite of these obstacles, many high poverty urban high schools are providing quality education to students and are the home to many educational reform efforts. The success of these reforms is fundamental for improving the quality of instruction in big city high schools across the country.

The Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), a coalition of 57 of the nation's largest urban public school districts, in collaboration with the Department of Education (ED), conducted an education forum to examine efforts by high poverty, urban high schools, especially those receiving Title I assistance, to reform and improve instruction. The Department of Education wanted to understand how to support Title I high schools as they implement comprehensive, standards-based reforms. The forum had two goals;

1. To share best practices for reforming high poverty urban high schools.
2. To review the Department of Education's *Transforming Title I High Schools: Enacting Comprehensive, Standards-Based Reform in Challenging Settings*.

The forum was held on February 17-18, 2000, in Washington, DC. Twenty urban educators, representing 15 districts, participated in the forum including central office administrators, curriculum and instruction directors, and high school principals. Educational researchers from Columbia University's Teachers College facilitated the meeting. The following city school districts were represented:

- Baltimore City Public Schools
- Boston Public Schools
- Chicago Public Schools
- Cleveland Public Schools
- Detroit Public Schools
- Fort Worth Independent School District
- Houston Independent School District
- Los Angeles Unified School District
- Memphis City Public Schools
- New York City Board of Education
- Oklahoma City Public Schools
- Philadelphia School District
- Portland Public Schools
- Rochester City School District
- Salt Lake City School District



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**Summary of Discussion**

1. ***Successful reform strategies often focus on local contexts and relationships as opposed to systemic, district-wide initiatives.*** Successful reform efforts are initiatives that are centered on local relationships such as student-teacher interaction. Issues of power often influence these relationships and their effects on reform. Reform efforts need to include individualized learning experiences, flexible time frames, and early intervention strategies.

2. ***Standards-based reform is complicated in urban high schools by having to meet the many non-academic needs of a diverse student population.*** Urban high schools have large numbers of diverse student populations, including English language learners, poor students, and immigrants. Title I must find ways to help urban high schools meet high standards and demonstrate accountability while ensuring appropriate supports for all students.

3. ***Practitioners bring diverse experiences to the work of urban high school reform.*** The diverse experiences of those working in urban schools often contribute to different reform agendas. Three types of school leaders were identified: "career professionals" who received formal preparation in the field of education; "personalists" who attended urban schools themselves as children; and "change agents" who work for social justice. It is not uncommon for urban leaders to simultaneously possess more than one of these traits.

4. ***Practitioners often engage in experience-based reform strategies that are difficult to substantiate and scale-up.*** Practitioners in urban high schools often focus on ideas and practices based on their past experiences. Many of their reforms appear to be based on personal knowledge and experience about the practical workings of high schools and urban school systems. These reforms, while often very successful in local schools, are difficult to translate into large-scale, systemic reform efforts. Urban high school leaders need assistance in documenting their successes and in implementing reforms that are research-based rather than solely experience-based.

5. ***Continuous leadership development is critical to improving urban high schools.*** Education reform often requires administrators and teachers in school districts to learn new behaviors. If reform is to succeed, continuous professional development is critical to getting staff to think and act in new ways. Professional development needs to include teachers, principals, and central office personnel.

6. ***Educational reform does not occur in a vacuum.*** Reform efforts need to take into account societal contexts and how these conditions affect students, teachers' roles, and the purpose of schools. Schools often are asked to take on roles that have previously been filled by families. As society becomes more technologically driven and fast-paced, teacher pedagogy needs to reflect those changes. Reform efforts need to consider societal trends and the many expectations that our society has for its public schools.

7. ***Public attitudes about investing in low-income urban students must be addressed.*** Many reform efforts will continue to struggle to succeed if the public does not believe that children and youth in cities are worth investing in financially and educationally. Districts must confront negative perceptions about the futility of investing in urban students and provide more compelling pictures of urban school successes.

8. ***A clear vision with high standards is critical to successful high school reform efforts.*** A shared vision of high standards for all students is essential to high school reform. Schools need to clearly articulate their vision and high standards to students, staff, and the community. Schools also must be able to supply the resources needed to provide quality teachers, instructional materials, adequate facilities, etc. to ensure that all students reach those high standards.

9. ***Practitioners must maintain a high level of commitment.*** Reforming urban high schools is a difficult challenge. Creating the necessary environment necessary to sustain the commitment of school staff is essential for change. Urban districts must remain committed to goals that are often difficult to reach such as smaller classes, smaller high schools, ending social promotion, increasing parent involvement, and holding all students to high standards.

10. ***Urban high school leaders are enthusiastic about sharing their experiences with each other and collaborating with the Department of Education.*** Educators benefit from reflecting and sharing their ideas with each other. The Department of Education could offer financial support and networking opportunities to schools and could provide information about research-based reform strategies.

## Critical Components of Successful Urban High Schools

Educational reform in urban high schools is a complex process, according to the forum's participants. Still, participants agreed that there are common ingredients in all successful urban high schools, regardless of student demographics. These ingredients include efforts that:

1. Create an environment for high school staff to learn from one another.

2. Seek in-depth and comprehensive solutions to challenges, rather than superficial "band-aid" solutions.

3. Recognize and address the needs of a diverse student population.



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4. Ensure that all staff know and understand the school's vision and mission.

5. Create smaller learning communities in which students and teachers feel more connected to the school.

6. Recognize and reward exemplary teachers.

7. Encourage and foster teacher renewal.

8. Implement a staff leadership development plan.

9. Build upon the strengths of the existing school structures and personnel.

10. Build collaborative relationships with teacher unions.

11. Have candid conversations about society's commitment to educating low-income students of color and how a district can affect these societal attitudes.

12. Include a plan for "scaling-up" reform strategies.

13. Collect and analyze data related to reform strategies and their impact.

14. Provide additional technical support to low-performing schools.

15. Select and develop leaders that exemplify commitment, compassion, and the ability to negotiate complex interpersonal relationships.

16. Minimize different "piecemeal" reform efforts and develop focused, systemic reform efforts.

17. Establish a process to reward innovative thinking and instructional practices.

18. Communicate regularly with the public about successes.

19. Recognize and create "community schools."

20. Provide adequate funding for urban high schools.

21. Work with the U.S. Department of Education to learn about research-based reform initiatives.

## Forum Participants

| Name | Title | District/Organization |
|---|---|---|
| Baker, Nicole | Research Specialist | Council of the Great City Schools |
| Balsley, Catherine | Curriculum Director | School District of Philadelphia |
| Barrengos, John | Graduate Student | Columbia University - Teachers College |
| Bradford, Mackie | Principal | Detroit Public Schools |
| Carl, Shauna | Curriculum Director | Salt Lake City School District |
| Casserly, Michael | Executive Director | Council of the Great City Schools |
| Clunk, Edward | High School Development | Chicago Public Schools |
| Cohen, Michael | Assistant Secretary | ED/Elementary and Secondary Education |
| D'Anna, Laura | Principal | Baltimore City Public Schools |
| Dansby, Walter | Asst. Supt/Curriculum | Fort Worth Independent School District |
| Ford, Dianna | Guidance Department Head | Baltimore City Public Schools |
| Gray, Beverly | Principal | Detroit Public Schools |
| Griffin-Golden, Cecilia | Chief Academic Officer | Rochester City School District |
| Patricia Harris | Chief of Staff - Instruction | School District of Philadelphia |
| Johnson, Judith | Deputy Assistant Secretary | ED/Elementary and Secondary Education |
| Lappin, Howard | Principal | Los Angeles Unified School District |
| Lewis, Sharon | Research Director | Council of the Great City Schools |
| McNeil, Patricia | Assistant Secretary | ED/Vocational & Adult Education |
| Miller, Ron | Leadership Director | Oakland Unified School District |
| Peebles, Thandiwe | Exec. Director - Academic Affairs | Cleveland Municipal School District |

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|---|---|---|
| Powell, Linda | Associate Professor | Columbia University - Teachers College |
| Price-Baugh, Ricki | Curriculum Director | Houston Independent School District |
| Snead, David | Principal | Boston Public Schools |
| Staples, Brian | Principal | Oklahoma City Public Schools |
| Staples, Susan | Director - Career/Technical Ed | Oklahoma City Public Schools |
| Weathers, Curtis | Urban Systemic Initiative Director | Memphis City Public Schools |
| Wechsler, Norman | Superintendent - Bronx High Schools | New York City Board of Education |
| Wilde, Jeffrey | Program Analyst | ED/Elementary and Secondary Education |
| Wolleck, Greg | Principal | Portland Public Schools |